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## Product Placement with 'Chinese Characteristics': Feng Xiaogang's Films and *Go Lala Go!*

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### Abstract:

This study examines the practice of product placement (or 'soft advertisement' / *ruanxing guanggao*) in Chinese cinema in order to create an understanding of the specific realities of film production and consumption. The return of consumer culture, instead of nostalgically recreating the ruined socialist past, engenders the imaginary of a 'brand' new China of the global future. Commercialization of film and television exploits the emerging practice of product placement as economic necessity and a reflection of the urban consumer culture. The director Feng Xiaogang, encouraged by the private film company Huayi Brothers, exemplifies the integration of product placement in a series of high budget box office hits. Feng's films *Feichang wurao* / *If You are the One* (2008) and its sequel (2010) successfully merge the narratives surrounding the new urban middle class and their conspicuous consumption in China and abroad. Adapted from a popular 'workplace' novel, *Du Lala shengzhi ji* / *The Promotion of Du Lala* (2007), Xu Jinglei's *Go Lala Go!* (2010), a chick flick aimed at white collar women, places products including luxury cars, apartments, personal goods, fashion items and laptops, while downplaying office politics in favour of love and consumption as its main tropes. Through examining product placement in Feng's films and *Go Lala Go!*, this study analyses why twenty-first century Chinese cinema merges entertainment and commercial culture, how the practice reflects the emergence of consumer culture in China and the specificity of the use of product placement in Chinese cinema.

### Key words:

Product placement, commercial Chinese cinema, Feng Xiaogang, workplace novels, consumption, urban female professionals, postfeminism

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This article asks how recent Chinese films employ the practice of product placement, and the significance of the phenomenon within the Chinese context. Product placement is

defined as the 'placement of a brand or a firm in a movie or in a television program by different means and for promotional purposes' (d'Astous & Séguin 1999, p.896). This study aims to create an understanding of the specific realities of film production and consumption in China, alongside the return of consumer culture. The article tackles several research questions. Firstly, what accounts for the prominence of product placement in recent commercial films in China? Secondly, what does product placement reflect in relation to consumer culture in China, using Feng Xiaogang's films and *Go Lala Go!* as case studies? Thirdly, how important is the Chinese context in understanding product placement in Chinese cinema?

I will consider the career of the director Feng Xiaogang, who has become synonymous with the practice of product placement within the contexts of commercial Chinese cinema. Feng's films *Feichang wurao/If You are the One* (2008) and its sequel (2010) successfully merge the narratives surrounding the new urban middle class and their conspicuous consumption in China and abroad,[1] which engenders the imaginary of a 'brand' new China of the global future. The article then focuses on *Go Lala Go!*, an adaptation of the novel *Du Lala shengzhi ji/The Promotion of Du Lala* (hereafter *PDL*), first published in 2007 by someone with the pen name Li Ke. The bestseller defines a genre known as 'workplace literature' (*zhichang xiaoshuo*). The 2010 film (directed and co-written by Xu Jinglei who also took on the lead role) receives corporate sponsorship from twenty global products including luxury cars, apartments, personal goods, fashion items, laptops and Lipton tea. The film's target audience is the rising class of young professional urban women as new solvent customers. Through examining the production context and history of *Go Lala Go!*, and the responses from non-Chinese reviewers, Chinese writers and audiences, the current discussion aims to open up new avenues to investigate the practice of product placement in China alongside existing knowledge on the marketization of Chinese cinema, and how the practice of product placement can be understood within the postsocialist Chinese context.

## Postsocialist China and the Rise of the Urban Consumer Culture

For the purpose of the current discussion, postsocialism denotes a 'cultural logic' to 'negotiate the residual socialist past and the emergent capitalist present to concoct new imaginaries of a transitional society' (Lu 2007, p.208). Zhang Xudong notes that postsocialism describes the 'emergence of a Chinese everyday world and mass culture' reactive to Mao's China (2008, p.15). New cultural work in China has dramatically changed since Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy from 1979. The generation of cultural producers in the 1980s (including the Fifth Generation directors) was 'fascinated by allegories of the ruins and wastelands of our traditional culture' (Dai 1999, p.191). Alongside this cultural milieu from the 1980s, China has seen the rise of a consumer society that serves not a coherent ideology but profit. Wang Jing in *Brand New China* dates the return of commercial advertising in the PRC to 1979 (2008, p.1). In 2010, the advertising industry in China was worth 343.7 billion RMB (\$55 billion), up 22 per cent from previous year, with online advertising up 87 per cent and broadcast TV advertising increasing 15.2 per cent (worth 133.1 billion RMB) (Research in China 2011).[2] The return of consumer culture, instead of nostalgically recreating the ruined socialist past, engenders the imaginary of a 'brand' new China of the global future.

Daria Berg's study (2011) of the online reality show *Xinling paidang/Soul Partners*, a version of *Big Brother* in which six young people are 'forced' to flat-share, argues that the series is a highly constructed enactment of perceived post-socialist reality and modernity. The series had sponsorship from Thames Town, a luxury apartment development in Songjiang, Shanghai. The show combines hyperreality, commercialization, web 2.0 consumption and the cross-over of real estate and entrepreneurialism. *Soul Partners* epitomizes the reality trend in China through the 2000s. For instance, the popular Mongolian Cow Yogurt sponsored *Chaoji nüsheng/Super Girls* show, broadcast by Hunan satellite television from 2004, attracted over 400 million viewers and made the winners like the androgynous Li Yuchun instant celebrities. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) responded to the explosion of reality television shows by banning them during prime-time alongside its bid to curb 'excessive entertainment' and programmes of 'low taste' on 1 January 2012.[3] Part of this round of regulation also included the national ban on television commercials during prime-time dramas which would have an impact on the further expansion of product placement. The 'reality' presented by these shows is

therefore a contested vision, partly brought about by commercialization of the media industry but paradoxically restrained by State regulation of the media as representation of postsocialist lifestyle.

The state actively encourages the growth of the consumer market in China in a move away from the over-reliance on capital investment and export-led economy (Pettis 2013). This consumer revolution however is not uniform across China; given the increasing gaps in disposable income between the city and the countryside, this is primarily an urban phenomenon (Wang 2008, p.3). Related to the urban consumer is the re-emergence of the importance of social class in China (Rocca 2008, p.128); the middle class in China may be defined as professional, white collar workers who possess 'knowledge capital', to use the concept from Pierre Bourdieu's work (Bourdieu 1984), and they are the primary targets of the leisure industry and exponents consumerism (Rocca 2008, pp.132–133). The mediasphere, cultural production in the visual and textual fields characterized by endless expansion (Debray 1991) and including film, television, the Internet and social media, is a fertile ground to understand the meanings of urban middle class existence. Product placement in films and television and the ways by which the products are embedded in the narratives imagine postsocialist reality of the urban consumer class. The case studies contained in the current discussion target the middle class, which will reveal to what extent that the practice of product placement and their projected consumer classes are specific to the Chinese context.

### **Product Placement and Commercial Chinese Cinema**

Since the liberalization of film production in China (Lye 2008; Yeh & Davis 2008) film financing needs to come from outside the state studio system that used to plan, produce and distribute all films, and product placement has increasingly brought new avenues for funding films and television programmes. Commercial cinema in China prioritizes box office performance rather than ideology, unlike films from before the Reform Era, which were tightly controlled and produced by the state to serve the communist regime. In the early 1990s, the authorities put an end to the 40-year-old system of unified distribution of domestic films through China Film Group but to allow the direct negotiation between film studios and local distributors (Tang 2009, p.83). In 1994, China Film Group was further

allowed to import ten foreign films a year on shared box-office basis, which generally became blockbusters. The sharing of revenue between producers and distributors created a film market forging creativity and marketing. Yu Dong, who set up Beijing Bona film distribution company in 1999 said, 'The new mechanism has broken the monopoly of administrative bodies over film distribution from a "government activity" to a "market activity."' It has made cinemas subject to market-economy management, and given opportunities to private companies.' (cited in Tang 2009, p.87) It was only in 2003 that the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) licensed five private companies to distribute domestic films nationally, and this marked another milestone in the marketization of Chinese cinema. To understand commercial Chinese cinema in the last decade, it is vital to consider its convergence with market management throughout the production and distribution processes, of which product placement has become an increasingly central element.

Cinema has had a close relationship with mass consumption and product placement has been a powerful practice in the United States due to a largely unregulated or weakly regulated environment (Hardy 2010, p.234). The majority of existing scholarship on product placement in film and television comes from the fields of marketing and advertising, and investigates the responses to and effects of the practice (d'Astous & Séguin 1999; Galician & Bourdeau 2004; Gould et al. 2000; Gupta & Gould 1997; Lin 2012; Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen 2007). Scholars at the Opinion Institute of Renmin University, China, 'Product Placement' Task Force studied the effects and methods of research, taking into account American and British policies regarding product placement but not those in China (2011). The researchers of the Task Force point out that existing analysis of product placement practice centres around its transparency, effectiveness and fairness. While earlier studies tend to focus on audiences' recall of the products, more recent research shows that the effects of product placement are more complex than whether viewers memorize the products.

Product placement (or 'soft advertisement' / *ruanxing guanggao*) in commercial Chinese cinema has become a widespread practice, expanding at up to 40 per cent every year (The Mirriad 2012).[4] If the use of product placement within the film industry is indicative of the rise of the consumer society in China and a necessity for financing, what is the significance of product placement as a film practice? Internationally, the legal

regulations controlling product placement reflect the way that it is thought of as an element of television or film distinguishable from editorial or narrative contents.[5] These principles assume negative effects of product placement so that it has to be separate from the editorial contents, in order for the advertisements to remain transparent. In China, there is no separate legal requirement but product placements come under Advertising Law (1995), which similarly specifies that advertisement needs to be distinguishable (Article 13), so consumers cannot be misled.[6] The distinction between editorial contents (or narrative in the case of feature films) and advertising assumes that the verisimilitude on-screen is 'interrupted' by the placement of product, rather than that the products 'integrate' the off-screen reality of consumer culture as part of the narrative. How does this relate to its specific context – here in relation to the newly re-emerged commercial space of Chinese cinema?

Product placement accentuates the intertextuality that exists in postmodern culture where texts are always relational (Donohoe 1997, p.234). [7] For instance, product placement in films not only stealthily integrates into the storyline but the products' association with the stars might have a positive impact on the audiences. Unlike advertising in between programmes or before a film, product placement is a textual practice that interweaves into films and television, making constant references to the wider cultural discourse and augmenting the filmgoers' consumption from the film to something more. The current discussion focuses on the production of the text-within-text – the product placement within the case studies and how they refer to urban consumer culture in China.

The director Feng Xiaogang has been the foremost practitioner of product placement. Feng's background is different from the Fifth Generation directors; he did not study at the film academy but worked for a military art troupe before becoming art designer, then director, in television (R. Zhang 2008). Together with the popular 'hooligan' writer Wang Shuo and other collaborators Feng created television series, such as *Beijingren zai Niuyue/Beijingers in New York* (1993), that achieved high audience ratings. Feng also has a long term relationship with Huayi Brothers, a private film and music production company set up in 1994 by the brothers Wang Zhongjun and Wang Zhonglei, who claimed to have the ambition to become China's Times Warner (Tang 2009, p.111). Huayi produced a small number of films each year but because of its partnership with Feng often accounted for 20-30 per cent of total box office in China (p.108). The company first funded Feng's films in 1998

and made him an in-house director in 2000. Product placement has been part of Huayi's commercial strategy though Feng Xiaogang has been reported to occasionally take issues with his marketing colleagues, proclaiming that it has to be 'done cleverly and not clumsily' (cited in Tang 2009, pp.109-110).

Yomi Braester argues that film directors have become entrepreneurs who not only produce their films but also act as advertisers and promoters (2005, p.550). Among other examples, he cites Feng Xiaogang's *Da wan/Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), made through partnership between Huayi and Columbia, which parodies the film director as a *dawan'r* (translated as in the title 'big shot' or literally 'big bowl'). Donald Sutherland plays Tyler, a Hollywood director re-making *The Last Emperor* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987) in the Forbidden City in Beijing. After suffering a stroke, Tyler makes Yo Yo (played by Feng's longstanding lead actor Ge You), the Chinese cameraman who was filming a 'making of' documentary, to give him a comedy funeral. Short of money, Yo Yo has to sell advertising space during the Big Shot's funeral. Feng's main target here is the ever-expanding advertising industry in China and rampant commercialization of major tourist sites. Nonetheless, the ironic humour of Feng was considered too local for wide theatrical distribution in the USA, as Columbia had initially planned (Zhang 2005, p.189). It is ironic that the product placement in Feng's films simply grew and grew since *Big Shot's Funeral*. *Shouji/Cell Phone* (2003) had sponsorship from Motorola, BMW, China Mobile and MTone Wire, which provided half of the budget. Together with audio-visual copyright sales, product placement covered the entire cost of film production, so that every ticket sold was pure profit (Tang 2009, p.111). *Tianxia wuzei/A World Without Thieves* (2004) features BMW, HP laptops, Canon, Nokia phones, with products being written into the scripts (Zhou 2007, pp.123-124). Braester's study has shown that it is appropriate to consider product placement as part of the rise of the consumer society and commercial world in China, as a means to explore market and identity in urban China in the post-Reform Era; 'the director's entrepreneurial engagement [...] determines anew how films ally themselves with other media' (2005, p.550).

The reality is that big budget film production (by Chinese standard) cannot take place without private investment and commercial sponsorship. Feng, like the protagonist in *Big Shot's Funeral*, acknowledges the difficulties of including products in his films. He said in an interview for CCTV2 in 2005, 'If a film's budget was over 80 million, I just don't know



what the film would look like, just imagine how many advertisements I would have to find a place for' (cited in R. Zhang 2008, p.143). Nonetheless, Feng's use of product placement continued to increase. *If You are the One* (2008) and its sequel (2010) feature over 35 products (The Mirriad 2012). Aimed at the Chinese New Year market, *If You are the One* grossed 300 million RMB (\$44.22 million) in nineteen days.[8] Reiterating his statement about inserting the products cleverly, Feng said, 'Actually, I was against the idea of adding advertisements in a movie. But considering the cooperation with the producer, I have to compromise. I've tried my best to make the advertisements turn out in the course of nature' (Yingying 2010). These two films exemplify how he attempts to include the products in the storyline 'naturally.'

*If You are the One* tells the story of Qin Fen (played by Ge You), a middle-aged, wealthy inventor returning to China from abroad. As an ageing bachelor, he places an online advertisement for potential partners. So the film contains placement of cars, cell phones, restaurants (where Qin meets numerous potential suitors) and wine. Most notably, the inevitable couple – Qin and Liang Xiaoxiao (Shu Qi) – end up in expensive locations, advertising these as tourist destinations. Xixi Wetland in Suzhou and Hokkaido in Japan, areas of natural beauty, stand out as luxurious playgrounds for China's nouvelle riches. The fishing town of Abashiri in northern Hokkaido and Kushiro, an eastern city and its hot springs resorts were transformed as sentimental, nostalgic and rustic spots. Chinese tour operators organized sightseeing tours to visit the locations featured in the film (Shiozawa 2009). The Japan National Tourism Organization reported twenty-fold increase of Chinese tourists to Hokkaido, suggesting that tourists can follow the footsteps of the couple, 'How about using this pilgrimage to the film locations as an opportunity to find attractions of Eastern Hokkaido?'[9]

*If You are the One 2* promoted Sanya in Hainan in similar ways. In this sequel, Qin Fen and Xiaoxiao are still unsure of each other and they end up renting a luxury villa in Sanya for a 'trial marriage.' Shimei Bay, the forest park, and Guojianglong Bridge (Love Bridge) are infused with romantic meanings. As Xiaoxiao says in the film, 'The forest park is surreal,' and the drive through the area is presented like a tourism promotion video and car advertisement rolled into one. Less exotic are Beijing and surrounding landmarks such as the Mutianya section of the Great Wall (where Qin proposes to Xiaoxiao), Zizhuyuan Park in

Haidian and the 798 Art Zone. If western brands are used to realize consumers' preferred imaginings of the future nation' (Tian & Dong 2010, p.97), then foreign locations in these two films, similarly, conjure up the cosmopolitan aspirations of the rising middle class.

Even Feng's 2010 blockbuster *Yuzhen/Aftershock*, an emotive family drama bracketed by the 1976 Tangshan and 2008 Sichuan earthquakes, managed to place products. The film's narrative focuses on collective memory firstly through historicizing 1976 (the year of the earthquake, end of the Cultural Revolution and deaths of Premier Zhou Enlai and Mao) and then the material changes in the 30 years since. The son Fang Da pursues the new Chinese dream instead of educational achievement, and sets up his own successful travel agency. To demonstrate filial duty to his mother, he takes her to the most expensive restaurant in Tangshan, offers her *moutai* wine, drives around in a BMW car and wants to buy her a new apartment, all these in sharp contrast with the must haves at the beginning of the narrative in 1976 – a watch, bicycle, electric fan (Yangqi 2008). The film was the highest grossing domestic release until *Ren zai Jiongtu zhi Taijiong: Lost in Thailand* (Zheng Xu, 2012).

Despite writing the products into the narratives of these films, Feng often uses them to critique consumerism and commercialization, shrouding in ironic comedy to satisfy the audiences and investors alike. The couple in *World Without Thieves*, for instance, instead of stealing from an innocent young man who believes in the innate goodness of people end up sacrificing themselves to protect him. In this sense, Feng manages to be both a reluctant cultural entrepreneur and the most successful exponent of product placement in commercial Chinese cinema. Rui Zhang (2005) argues that many of Feng's early comedies are about the triumph of 'small characters' (p.21) and they expose 'social problems such as poverty and class discrepancy' (p.109). Feng's later films, exemplified by *If You are the One* and its sequel, shift their target audience to the middle class and new affluent consumers in postsocialist China while criticizing commercialization. What Feng presents in his films are therefore contested social realities. What appears 'natural' for one audience group in the Chinese context can seem unrealistic for another. In the following, I focus on the example of *Go Lala Go!*, a film that has a specific target audience: urban female professionals.

### *The Professional Young Female Consumer Fictionalized*

The bestselling book series *PDL*, first published in 2007 and followed by three sequels in 2008, 2010 and 2011, was written by Li Ke (birth date and real name unknown). By 2011, 350,000 copies (not including pirate copies) of the original novel had been sold (Wang 2011, p.54). Due to the phenomenal success of the series, Li has been named the Chinese J.K. Rowling. The book began life as an Internet blog posted by Li Ke in August 2007. The CEO of Booky (*Bozha tianjun*), a commercial publisher in China, read the blog and asked Li to write a bestseller based on the story. Initially only 15,000 copies were sold, but then the publisher changed the cover to a stark red and white design to denote neutrality and quality, with an added slogan 'Her story is a more worthy reference than Bill Gates' (Wang 2011, p.54). Through word-of-mouth, the novel became a bestseller from 2008 onwards. *PDL* defines a new genre called 'workplace literature' (*zhichang xiaoshuo*) although novels depicting office life and politics had existed before its appearance. The genre portrays office politics and inter-personal conflicts, and is aimed at white collar workers and university graduates as its main readership.

The major significance of *PDL* among these workplace novels is its ability to reflect on the gender discourse in China's corporate office space populated by a new class of white collar women working for foreign investment companies, a phenomenon that has risen in importance since the Reform Era. *PDL* was adapted as a feature film and a television drama series in April and May 2010 respectively. The preface of the book goes on to repeat its selling point as Lala's ability to be a model for the office workers and this is a story of her journey to become a top executive (*gaoguan*): 'Lala is a representative of the middle class [...] Without special background but well educated, she relies on personal efforts to succeed. *PDL* tells the success story of an ordinary worker that resonates with many common people's hope for wealth and freedom' (Li 2008, p.16). The novel begins four years after her college graduation, Du Lala (from the post-1970s generation) starts working for the subsidiary of DB, a fictional American corporation and a Fortune 500 company, as a Sales Assistant in their southern branch in Guangzhou with a monthly salary of RMB 4000 (p.32). Most importantly, *PDL* depicts the struggle of the white collar miss (Farrer 2002, p.36) whose work ethic is about climbing to the top in a competitive environment. In other words, the novel reflects a cutthroat office culture that is distinctive from the old Socialist work unit. Although the romantic plot is common in novels aimed at

women, in *PDL* we read how Lala and her love interest Wang Wei discuss strategies of hiding their love affair at work which even Lala suggests is more like business negotiation than conversation between lovers (Li 2008, pp.262–263).[10] At the end it is Wang who willingly gives up his highly paid job in order to preserve Lala's reputation and position at DB.

The hierarchy of the company is a microcosm of the new Chinese society, according to Lala's colleague Helen: anyone under the rank of managers is *xiaozi* (literally, small capital), the common poor who rely on public transport to get to work. Managers are *zhongchan* (middle class), characterized by the ability to make house purchase without a bank loan, and their Volkswagen cars (the preferred model for top managers is the Passat) (Li 2008, pp.39–40). Helen's explanation suggests that material goods, brands and consumption define the status of the characters. On hearing this, Lala decides that she does not want to remain an Assistant and therefore *xiaozi* all her working life. Her boyfriend Wang Wei, Chief Executive of the Key Accounts Department, drives an Audi A6 and likes Japanese food. Wang's romantic gestures include purchasing a pair of blue Nike sports pants for Lala, and wanting to buy her jewellery and cosmetics that he reads in in-flight magazines (p.289). The couple watch HBO television programmes, and at the end of the novel, Lala, now a top executive, has become a frequent flyer herself and uses an LV (Louis Vuitton) handbag (p.368). The description of the workers is in line with the consumer class of 'yuppies' in China – who live in coastal urban areas, are 20-45, college educated and occupy professional and managerial positions (Cui & Liu 2001). This is also the salary class who aspire to luxury consumer goods aimed at the nouveau riche (Wang 2008, p.11).

The novel therefore portrays the journey of a young woman as a corporate 'body' and consumer. Chinese workplace literature aimed at women shares some characteristics of the western category 'chick lit' – a term first appeared in the USA in the 1990s, and a kind of women's fiction that is also classed as post-feminist fiction.[11] It can be argued that these female-centred novels support a new gender regime offering displacement of the feminist challenges to patriarchy (McRobbie 2004). Their readers are encouraged to believe in personal improvement in women's lives by the independent spirited heroines (Crane 1994) rather than collective change, allowing gender hierarchy to continue to exist unchallenged.

So, the struggle of Du Lala does not focus on the newly re-emerged gender and class divisions in China but is instead an individualized professional challenge. The personal choice becomes one between home and work, and the heroine's life is defined by consumption, as Diane Negra writes, 'Postfeminism attaches considerable importance to the formulation of expressive personal lifestyle and the ability to select the right commodities to attain it' (2009, p.4). The workplace literature genre personifies gender and class based divisions in the postsocialist workplace, and the consumer culture in contemporary China. This Chinese context explains the adaptation of *PDL* as a film and the practice of product placement within it illustrates this extra-cinematic reality of the class of professional women and consumers.

### ***Go Lala Go!***

The film *Go Lala Go!* can be described as a fashion, glamour 'dapian' (literally, big movie). *Go Lala Go!* is co-written, directed by, and starred Xu Jinglei, alongside her real-life partner Stanley Huang (Huang Lixing) and singer/actress Karen Mok (Mo Wenwei). Xu is known as one of the 'Four Young Dams' and a famous blogger (Li 2010).[12] In 2007, Xu also started an online magazine called *Kaila* (Open or Begin),[13] a magazine that focused on young lifestyle for women and attracted average monthly page views of 10 million. Xu sold jewellery under the Kaila brand. As we shall see, she is most suited to endorse the products being placed within this film. Within the first five weeks of release the film already took RMB 124,530,000 at the box office, over its production budget of RMB 100 million (Abrahamsen 2008). The film exploits the commercial value of its star and director, and was created from the start as a brand product. The producer Zhang Yibai was reported to have picked up the book from a friend, read it in in day, and decided straightaway to buy the rights to film (Zhang et al. 2010, p.90). Working with China Film Group (the longstanding state-run film production and distribution company) and a media corporation DMG, Zhang said in interview that not only film-makers and actors worked on the project from the beginning, but advertising, public relations and new media professionals as well, who brought new sources of funding, resources and media platforms. DMG is an advertising, marketing and film production company in China. Its slate has included the epic anniversary release *Jianguo daye/The Founding of a Republic* (Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin) in 2009, and major Hollywood releases for distribution in China.[14] What is

most important is that DMG owns 'China's premier integrated advertising agency, offering unparalleled integrated marketing services,' according to the company's website. Due to the involvement of DMG, the extensive practice of product placement in the film accentuates the conspicuous consumption of white collar professionals in China while downplaying the importance of the corporation in the workers' lives, which is the main focus of the novel.

*Go Lala Go!* fully utilizes the fact that Xu Jinglei and the book were already well-known brands in China. In turn, the cast of the film, especially Xu and Mok, effectively acts as celebrity endorsement of the products and engages in 'co-branding' (celebrity and the products they endorse have a reciprocal relationship that is mediated by their brand-images) (Seno & Lukas 2007). In other words, they have become model consumers to the target audiences who are assumed to have 'the desire to be modern and financially independent', 'mediated (and mediatized) by the compulsion to identify with stars and with *mingmo* (famous models, as opposed to the *laomo*, or model workers, of the socialist era), who display the triad of youth, glamour, and wealth' (Zhang 2001, p.150). The movie poster of *Go Lala Go!*, featuring leggy, beautiful female stars alongside Stanley Huang, references Hollywood rom-coms such as *Sex and the City*. The comparison is apt – Patricia Field, costume designer for the *Sex and the City* television series and movies and *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006), worked on *Go Lala Go!* Field supposedly found 50 outfits for Xu in the 105-minute film (Global Times 2011). During the promotion of the film, Xu appeared in numerous Chinese editions of international fashion magazines. There are also shopping websites promoting Lala-style fashion inspired by the costumes worn by the stars in the film (Tang 2010). Lala is characterized as ambitious but a coquettish young woman in the film. There is little detail of her leisure time and home life; she tells Wang Wei, 'women have two ways of decompressing – shopping or eating.' Later in the film, when Lala becomes jealous of Wang's suspected relationship with his ex-girlfriend and Lala's boss, Rose, she goes out and spends all her savings on an open-top Mazda car. The film therefore continues and exaggerates the focus on brand consumption that is already present in the book, advertised through famous domestic stars.

The film also profits from movie tie-in and cross-marketing with other products. *PDL* 2 was published when the film was announced, and *PDL* 3 came out when the film was

released. The producers worked closely with two of China's biggest online booksellers - Dang Dang and Amazon China - so that book sales increased during the film's promotion and release (Wang 2011, p.55). Product placement deals provided two-third of the film's budget, of which the producer Zhang Yibai was open about, 'Regarding product placement, I feel that life is inseparable from brands these days. So, if the narrative can naturally be designed to include them, it is appropriate. There will be computer and mobile phones [in an office environment]. If you don't accept product placement, you will only lose the income. From Mazda, we received 4-50 million *yuan* income. We would not be able to film in Thailand without sponsorship' (Zhang et al. 2010, p.95). Xu Jinglei did not mind collaborating with the advertisers either. She proudly proclaimed, 'A director whose films are without product placements is nothing' (Wang 2012). *Go Lala Go!* promotes twenty products that appear 66 times (in scenes 29 times (44%), dialogues 18 times (27%), plot 10 times (15%), as image 9 times (14%)) (Cui 2011). The products promoted include fashion brands (Gucci, Dior, Chloe, Chanel), jewellery, Thai tourism, Lenovo computer, Lipton tea - one shot even lasts six seconds. The producer of *Go Lala Go!* rightly points out that the office environment, like other aspects of contemporary urban lives, is infused with brand products.

The choice of the brands goes beyond the affordability of an office worker but represents that of the 'golden collar' class - successful entrepreneurs, CEOs of multinational companies and celebrities - the *nouvelle riche*. Lala therefore epitomizes the aspirational middle class; even though foreign, luxury goods and private cars are beyond the affordability of most office workers, the film relies on them to appeal to the film-goers. The relative lack of domestic brands can be explained by the future-symbolic of western brands (Tian & Dong 2010). These brands act effectively as an imagined future lifestyle for the urban consumer. This commercial film exemplifies the new China where the grand narrative of the past propagated as truth by the state has been replaced by a 'brand' new world that does not serve a dominant ideology but the market.

I have compared critical and audiences responses from the USA and Britain, and China in order to understand the reception of the advertising of global goods in a Chinese film within different consumption contexts. One American viewer writes,

Fast camera cuts, bright colors and copious amounts of product placement make it feel like an American TV show. If I didn't know better, I would assume that everyone working in a corporate office in China drank Lipton tea while talking on a Nokia phone and emailing on their Lenovo. (davesvidro 2010)

The existence of global products is clear enough that the reviewer identifies the practice of product placement to be the most prominent feature of the film. However, the reviewer questions the realism of the film in terms of its depiction of the office environment in China. The British scholar Roy Stafford also notes the 'unrealism' and future-fantastic imaginary of the product placement in the film,

Just as in the 1950s when Chinese films sought to promote the idealised worker struggling to defeat class enemies, here LaLa is a modern Chinese business worker, diligently pursuing her career. At each point of the narrative when she is promoted in the company, an on-screen title tells us her new job title, her age and how much she earns. But this is the only realist data. Otherwise we learn very little about her home life and we see just as little of the bustle of city streets [...] Everyone who works in the office building is slim and attractive and wears colourful outfits. (Stafford 2012)

What these commentators suppose to be the unreality of the film is the conspicuous consumption of the characters, as it challenges with expectations of an office environment in China. Stafford's reference to the model workers of the communist past is relevant to the current analysis. To a greater (in the novel) or lesser extent (in the film) Lala is presented as a diligent worker. In this way, Lala is a new model worker and a model consumer. Nonetheless, the representation of Lala in this film stresses the importance of her role as a consumer over and above her work. While the conflict free world of commerce depicted in *Go Lala Go!* seems unrealistic to western observers, Lala reflects the aspirations of the white collar professionals and consumer class in postsocialist China. Some netizens in China responded similarly to their western counterparts, that the film can be seen as romantic, fashion drama rather than about career development (Da\_Vinci 2011). One Chinese writer argues that the high fashion brands, such as Gucci and Channel, are unrealistic for an office



worker who is supposed to be on a 4000-*yuan* monthly salary, and the high amount of product placements seems like interruption rather than integration in the content of the film (Dai 2010, pp.154–155).

While both western and Chinese critical and popular responses emphasize the ‘unreality’ of the film, the producer’s ready acceptance of product placement is partly supported by quantitative audience research. A survey shows that Chinese audiences of *Go Lala Go!* were not too concerned about the practice of product placement. Even before the audiences watched the film, high percentages of them reported that they were aware of the well-known products: Nokia (98.6 per cent), Lenovo (97.9 per cent), Mazda (92.9 per cent); after viewing, 62 per cent said they noticed the product placement in the film, 26.36 per cent supported its presence and only 11 per cent did not accept the placement of the products in the film (Chen 2012). The responses to the film abroad and in China demonstrate that they share the experience of commercial consumption as a reality while simultaneously refusing it (to varying degrees) as a natural part of the verisimilitude. The unrealistic but aspirational consumer culture depicted in the film is nevertheless rooted in the postsocialist conditions: the rise of the urban, professional class, especially women who have disposable income. The numerous global products that are placed within commercial cinema, as seen in the example of *Go Lala Go!* convey a sense of cosmopolitanism for the Chinese spectator-consumer. It can be argued that the Chinese target market for the film shares an imaginary middle class lifestyle with their global counterparts. A shift of analytic focus on the ‘reality’ for professional young women according to the film will be fruitful in understanding the gender discourse at work.

Diane Negra states that ‘[postfeminism] concentrates a great deal of representational attention on home, time, work, and consumer culture and tends to produce narratives and images that represent female anxiety and fantasize female empowerment in these realms’ (2009, p.12). Both Zhang Yibai and Xu Jinglei claimed in interview that fashion, office and love were attractive topics to the target audiences, and therefore they became the main focus of *Go Lala Go!* (Wang 2011). These aspects of women’s lives are presented as elements of self-made success within which women can exert a level of control. The director/female lead Xu Jinglei further stated in interview that she thought about conflicts within the office environment and the love story depicted in the novel and decided the latter would be more

attractive as a film plot. In the book, Du Lala lands her dream job at DB while trying to get out of another where she is sexually harassed. Though the film briefly relates this part of the narrative, subsequently the obvious gender inequality and hierarchy within the workplace are de-emphasized in *Go Lala Go!* Xu even cut out characters that seem too confrontational (Xu et al. 2010, pp.23 – 25). The rivalry between Lala and Rose is largely portrayed in the film as a result of their shared love interest rather than work-related. The de-emphasis of the corporate world and the conflicts of the work environment contained in the novel undermines the subsequent adaptation's potential to comment on gender and power in contemporary Chinese society. The film therefore devotes proportionally more screen time to the love plot and consumer lifestyle in the form of product placement.

At the end, Du Lala never questions the personal cost of the corporate life, unlike Wang Wei and Rose. Wang says, 'I work so hard everyday. I don't know what for?' Rose similarly declares, 'I used to care so much about promotions. I thought only promotions could prove my value. The title's different. So what. I'm not happy at all.' Lala decides that her career is more important than her relationship with Wang; she hides the fact that Wang will be made redundant from him. Rose forewarns him, and both Wang and Rose separately decide to leave the competitive business environment to 'find themselves.' At the end of the film, Wang is seen working as a tour guide in the resort in Thailand where he and Lala's love affair first blossoms. Negra suggests that in American chick flicks, moving away from work often acts as a defining feature of the establishment of identity (2009, p.99). The film adaptation of *PDL* makes Wang Wei and Rose the ones who recognize the 'retreatist' benefit of home and personal life, so Lala's commercial success remains a cause for celebration. The film is ambivalent towards the retreatist discourse, shifting the storyline onto Wang Wei and Rose but leaving Lala to continue with her professional ambition.

The critical and popular responses to *Go Lala Go!* signal a concern over the realism of the diegetic world by the disruption of product placement. I would suggest, however, the film serves as a prime example of the contested representational power of the mediasphere in China. The issue of gender and conflicts within the workplace are sacrificed for the commercialization of book as a brand and ultimately the film has become part of a new gender regime like its western, chick-lit counterparts of the 1990s. The success of the series on the one hand depicts the rise of a new class of professional women and the urban office

space as a sphere of everyday life for young Chinese women. Lala's 'promotion' in the novels reveals the complexity of young women's life in China, with the successful professionals often sacrificing personal and home life. On the other, the adaptation of the novel into a commercial 'chick flick' modelled on western post-feminist cultural productions erases many of the continuous conflicts and struggles for women in China, so the potential for the Du Lala phenomenon to comment on professional women's experiences becomes absorbed into a new gender regime 'with Chinese characteristics.'

### Concluding Remarks

Product placement in recent Chinese films has become a prominent practice due to the reduction of state funding, and it has become a practice that many commercial film producers and directors have accepted as part of the production process. Through Feng Xiaogang's films and *Go Lala Go!* this analysis suggests that the advertised products and services depicted in these films point to an imagined professional urban class with a western and lavish lifestyle that the audiences can aspire to. The cultural references and product placement of commercially successful Chinese films such as *If You are the One*, *If You are the One 2* and *Go Lala Go!* are largely aimed at the domestic market. While many of the products promoted in these films are foreign branded luxury goods, the emerging lifestyle these films portray remains a Chinese experience. As Braester suggests, 'Cinema, space and commerce in contemporary China have combined to form an innovative nexus between image making, market shaping and cultural identification' (2005, p.564). Just like Feng Xiaogang's seminal *Big Shot's Funeral*, which failed to amuse its American investor, the films examined in this study must also be understood chiefly within the Chinese context. While gender difference was denied during the Mao years, this has become a major source of inequality in the commercial world in the post-Mao-Deng era, alongside the rise of class hierarchy. *PDL* and the film adaptation individualize the gender discourse in postsocialist China, presenting a world of aspirational middle class and global capitalist values through blatant commercialism. Ultimately, the representation of the young professional woman in *Go Lala Go!* conforms to the Hollywood romantic comedy genre and neglects the struggles over gender, sexuality and class that continue to exist for many young women in urban China.

Instead, the material world in the newly re-emerged consumer society becomes a dominant part of the screen image through the high visibility of product placement.

The practice of product placement, as seen in the case of *Go Lala Go!*, shows how it targets specific social groups defined by personal characteristics, in this case, young urban female professionals, and highlights the emergence of class and gender differences in postsocialist China. The current analysis focuses on the specific realities of film production and consumption, opening up new avenues to investigate the significance of cultural and gender discourses exemplified by the practice of product placement in commercial cinema in China.

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### Endnotes

1. Thorstein Veblen (1899) defines the notion 'conspicuous consumption' in *Theory of the Leisure Class* as the way that the wealthy display the fact that they are wealthy, that they have access to fashion and taste but do not have to work.
2. All figures given at the exchange rate of 1 RMB= \$0.16, as of October 2012.
3. <http://factsanddetails.com/china.php?itemid=2242&catid=7&subcatid=43>. Accessed 3 January 2013.
4. The total profit was approximately \$10 million (62.7 million RMB) in 2010 (The Mirriad 2012).
5. For instance, from February 2011, regulations on product placement on UK television were relaxed but subject to principles such as editorial independence and control over programming, and distinction between editorial content and advertising.  
<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/commercial-references-television/>. Accessed 10 June 2012.
6. [http://www.novexc.cn/advert\\_law\\_95.html](http://www.novexc.cn/advert_law_95.html). Accessed 10 June 2012.
7. 'Intertextuality [...] foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life' (Allen 2000, p.5).

8. <http://www.screendaily.com/fengs-if-you-are-the-one-smashes-box-office-records/4042529.article>. Accessed 2 June 2013.
9. <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/cultural/pilgrimage/ifyouaretheone.html>. Accessed 5 July 2013.
10. The company has an unwritten policy that personal relationships at work usually result in one of the parties resigning from the company.
11. The novels *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Helen Fielding, 1996) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (Helen Fielding, 1999) have been adapted as films (Sharon Maguire, 2001; Beeban Kidron, 2004). 'Ally McBeal' was an American television series (1997-2002). 'Sex and the City,' based on a novel (Candice Bushnell, 1997), was an American television series produced by HBO (1998-2004) and adapted as two films (Michael Patrick King, 2008; 2010).
12. *Dan*, shortened from *huadan*, is the main female role in Chinese opera, which continues to be used to describe actresses in the performance arts. Xu's blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/xujinglei>) began in 2005 and as of September 2014, it had 312, 843, 000 hits. However Xu has not posted on this Sina site since November 2010.
13. See <http://kaila.com.cn/kaila>. The magazine is defunct, as of September 2014.
14. <http://www-us.dmg-entertainment.com/>. Accessed 2 May 2012.

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